
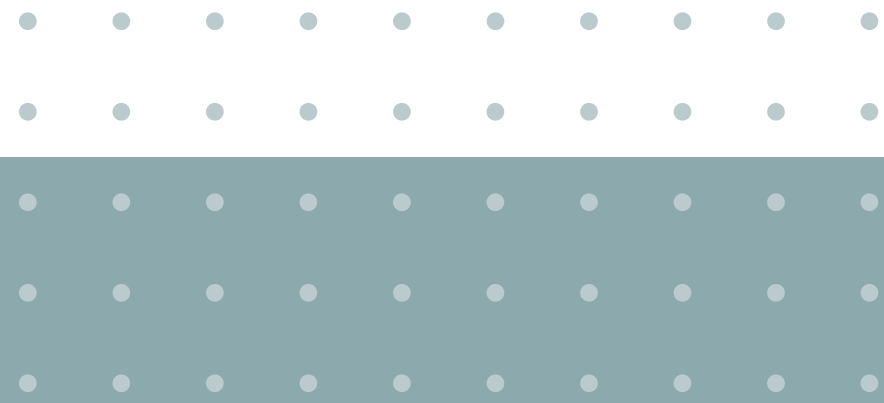


*GRANT, O MERCIFUL GOD, THAT YOUR CHURCH, BEING GATHERED TOGETHER IN UNITY BY YOUR HOLY SPIRIT, MAY SHOW FORTH YOUR POWER AMONG ALL PEOPLES, TO THE GLORY OF YOUR NAME; THROUGH JESUS CHRIST OUR LORD, WHO LIVES AND REIGNS WITH YOU AND THE HOLY SPIRIT, ONE GOD, FOR EVER AND EVER. AMEN. (232)*





# *THE CREEDS*





# THE APOSTLES CREED

- According to tradition, the twelve articles of faith in the Apostles' Creed were written by the apostles themselves, with each apostle contributing one statement.
- Scholars today generally believe this is not how the creed arose, but there is wide disagreement as to its age or even whether it is more ancient than the Nicene Creed.
- The most important thing for us to note here is that the Apostles' Creed is deeply connected with Holy Baptism.
  - From very early times, this creed was used as new Christians were baptized.
  - Today we continue this practice by incorporating the Apostles' Creed in our Baptismal Covenant in a question-and-answer format whenever we baptize someone or renew our baptismal promises.
- The Apostles' Creed is also used when we pray the Daily Office, especially in morning and evening prayer.
- Finally, we use the Apostles' Creed at funerals. Thus the earthly pilgrimage of a Christian begins and ends with the Apostles' Creed.

# THE NICENE CREED

- The Nicene Creed is largely an expansion of content very similar to what the Apostles' Creed covers.
- The Nicene Creed is named after Nicea, the place where the church held an ecumenical council (worldwide gathering of bishops) in the year 325 CE.
  - In response to certain divergent beliefs about Jesus, the bishops at that conference ratified the Nicene Creed.
  - This was later modified and extended in 381, and that version is more-or-less the one that Christians around the world have said for more than 1,600 years and still say each Sunday.
- The opening of the creed is not too complicated:
  - *We believe in one God,  
the Father, the Almighty,  
maker of heaven and earth,  
of all that is, seen and unseen.*
  - We assert that God the Father made all that is, everywhere.
    - Saying that God made everything has significant implications for how we treat the world.
  - We might also note that this version of the creed, from Rite II, has us saying, "We believe" which is how the oldest versions of the creed read.
    - Later, much of global Christianity preferred "I believe" and you can still find that version in our Rite I liturgy.
    - While "we" emphasizes our common profession of faith, it avoids personal accountability.
    - To say "we" emphasizes that we are stating not just our own beliefs, but that we are saying the beliefs of the whole church.
    - This might help us along sometimes if we personally struggle with parts of the creeds, knowing that we are really articulating the ideal faith of the whole church.
    - On the other hand, when I say "I believe" it reminds me that I take ownership of my own life of faith and beliefs.
    - Try the creed using both voices and consider the advantages or disadvantages of each.

- The Creed continues:

- *We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,  
the only Son of God,  
eternally begotten of the Father,  
God from God, Light from Light,  
true God from true God,  
begotten, not made,  
of one Being with the Father.  
Through him all things were made.*

- Nearly every sermon I've heard about Jesus is about his earthly life. And yet the creed has eight lines about the eternal life of Jesus Christ.
- Everything in these lines from the creed happened before Jesus was born.
  - To make these claims emphasizes the vastness of God's love for us.
  - To echo Saint John's words, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was God..." is to see Jesus not just as a person who lived in the Holy Land 2,000 years ago but as the crux of God's salvation history for all creation and for us.
- The words "of one Being with the Father" are especially important.
  - This means that Jesus Christ and his Father are peers and of one kind.
  - In simple, practical terms, to say that Jesus and his Father are of one being is to prevent us from wrongly saying that Jesus is lesser than the other persons of the Holy Trinity.
- Some of the phrases here ("Light from Light") are responses to specific controversies that raged in the ancient Byzantine world when the creed was composed.
  - These words and phrases are well worth exploring in depth, but for now, we can stand back and note how the Jesus of the creed is far vaster than the warm, fuzzy Jesus we sometimes imagine.

- Next the creed speaks of Jesus' entry into to earthly life:

- *For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven: by the power of the Holy Spirit he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary, and was made man.*
- It has long been traditional to bow or even genuflect as these words about the Incarnation are sung or spoken.
- This set of lines says much about Jesus—and about us.
  - Why did Jesus come to dwell with us? “For us and for our salvation.”
  - How was this accomplished? “By the power of the Holy Spirit.”
  - And of course, we cannot overlook the gift of Mary in all this. No shy, retiring woman, Mary boldly said “yes” to God’s invitation to bear God in Jesus Christ into the world.
- And perhaps the most important word here is incarnate, a word many people don’t understand.
  - Incarnate comes from the same root as con carne that you might have seen in a Mexican restaurant’s menu. It means with meat. To say Jesus is God incarnate is to say that Jesus is God enfleshed.
  - This takes away any possible idea that our God is remote from us or somehow does not understand the human experience.

- Next in the creed we turn our focus to the death and resurrection of Jesus:

- *For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered death and was buried. On the third day he rose again in accordance with the Scriptures;*
- This part of the creed begins by referencing Pontius Pilate.
  - Pontius Pilate was an official of the Roman empire.
  - His story is told in all four gospels, and there are mentions of him elsewhere.
  - It’s positively extraordinary that only he and Mary (the Mother of God) are the only two humans named in the creeds.
    - Mary brought Jesus into this earthly life.
    - Pilate played a key part in ending Jesus’ earthly life.
  - By repeating Pilate’s name every week, we are reminding ourselves of the historicity of Jesus Christ.
  - Pilate is a real person whose identity and existence are archeologically verifiable. Pilate is a real person, tainted by the same sin and fear that inhabit us all.
  - We invoke his name week after week, grounding Jesus in historical reality and exposing the painful gulf between our sins and fear and God’s love and hope.
- We then profess that Jesus died and was raised to new life.
  - This is one of the central claims of Christianity.
  - Apart from a claim of his resurrection, we might make the mistake of thinking that Jesus is merely a teacher.
  - Apart from a claim that Jesus really died for us, we might make the mistake of thinking that God’s love for us is limited.
  - Dying for another is an ultimate expression of commitment, and Jesus’ death proves God’s commitment to us and our salvation.

- Next we say,

- *he ascended into heaven*

- and is seated at the right hand of the Father.*

- He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead,*

- and his kingdom will have no end.*

- In the ascension, Jesus returns to heaven to dwell with God.

- The church recognizes this this central event as a major feast, which occurs on a Thursday forty days after Easter Sunday.

- Just before he returns to God, Jesus blesses his followers. He promises that the Spirit will abide with them—and thus with us—as Jesus’ ministry continues.

- The ascension is in some ways the beginning of our own earthly ministry of being Christ’s hands and feet in our world, ministering to the world in his name.

- The creed then moves into a part about judgment.

- Comfortable people don’t like to think about judgment and consequences.

- But put yourself in the place of someone born in Darfur or someone whose family was extinguished in the Holocaust or another of the too-many genocides of the last one hundred years.

- Righteous judgment may look very different for those who endure more evil than many of us can imagine. But the teaching of the gospel is clear: God will one day judge us and all people.

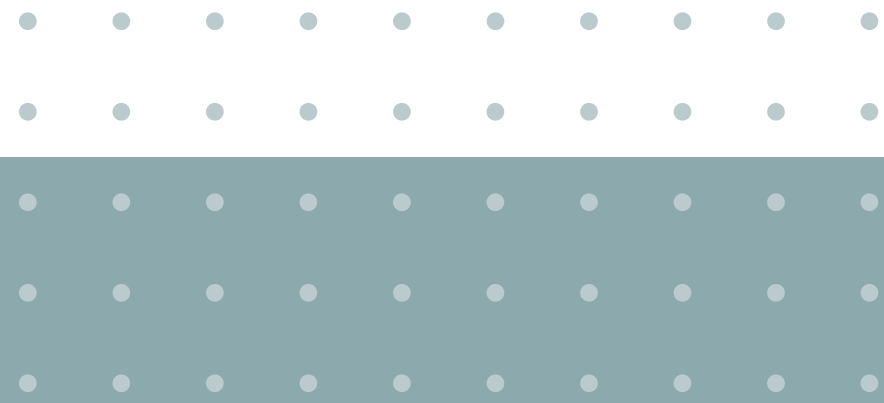
- For us to speak of judgment is to speak of our own judgment for failing to honor Christ in the most vulnerable people. Our prayer can and must be for mercy, for ourselves and our whole world.

- We will be judged—but by God (and not one another!). Fortunately, God’s judgment is above our pay grade, so we can focus on our own salvation while yearning for God’s mercy.

- The creed continues, moving to the Holy Spirit:
  - *We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son. With the Father and the Son he is worshiped and glorified. He has spoken through the Prophets.*
  - The third person of the Holy Trinity, the Holy Spirit, is oft-neglected.
  - We tend to pray to God the Father or God the Son much more frequently than we pray to God the Holy Spirit.
  - Only once a year, on the Day of Pentecost, do most of us turn our gaze fully to the Holy Spirit.
  - The Holy Spirit is the “giver of life” in that the Spirit was present from the moment of creation and continues to be one of the ways God animates us with God’s presence.
  - The creed reminds us, in case we forget, that the Spirit is itself worthy of worship and praise.
  - Finally, the creed emphasizes how the prophets through time have been the Holy Spirit’s voice.
  - This is important both because it reminds us that the Spirit is eternal—and not just in our present—and that God sometimes chooses to speak through people.
- This section of the creed has one of the most controversial lines.
  - In the original version of the Nicene Creed, the Spirit was said to proceed from the Father. Period.
  - Several centuries after the creed was ratified, the church in Europe began to insert another phrase, “and the Son.”
  - Whether or not “and the Son” is added has an effect on our understanding of the relationship among the God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.
  - To say from whence one proceeds is to describe the source of power and being, and this affects the relationship among the persons of the Trinity.
  - Proponents of each position will make a case that their position is the only possible correct one.
  - Anglicans have gradually begun to move toward the more ancient line. The bishops of the Anglican Communion have urged all Anglicans to omit “and the Son” in future prayer books, and, indeed, our own Episcopal Church has omitted the phrase in the *Enriching Our Worship* supplemental worship materials.
  - It’s all very complicated, but we mention this because wars have been fought over this. The language varies somewhat in modern liturgy as this controversy continues to play out,



- Next we profess our faith in the church universal:
  - *We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church.*  
*We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.*  
*We look for the resurrection of the dead,*  
*and the life of the world to come. Amen.*
  - We call the church holy, because we believe that Jesus Christ himself is the head of it, and that we, his disciples, carry on his ministry under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.
  - We call the church catholic, because despite our many differences, nearly every Christian recognizes the baptisms performed by nearly every other Christian.
  - We call the church apostolic because we are bound to teach and to practice the tradition that was handed down to us, continuing all the way back to the apostles.
  - And we end our recitation of the Nicene Creed with a statement of hope for an eternal life with God.
- The creeds are somewhere between rules of faith, doctrinal statements, poems of belief, and aspirational articulations of what we hope all Christians will confess as their faith.
- The language is meticulously precise and yet comprehensible by anyone.
- If the creeds seem elusive, give them time. If it seems that you have mastered them, give them even more time and study.
- Our creeds are gifts: They teach us about our faith, and as we study them, enrich and expand that very same faith.



# *THE BIBLE*



# *THE EPISCOPAL CHURCH IS A BIBLE CHURCH*

- Even though it's not in our name, the Episcopal Church is a Bible church.
  - The Bible plays a central role in our beliefs and practices.
  - Visit any Episcopal congregation on a Sunday and see for yourself: We take reading the Bible very seriously.
    - Our liturgy includes four different readings from the Bible: the Old Testament, the psalms, the New Testament, and the gospel.
    - After the Old Testament and New Testament readings, we proclaim "The Word of the Lord," a reminder that these are not just nice stories but holy, inspired words from God.
    - The gospel is often given special honor.
      - Many churches have a gospel procession, in which the gospel book is carried out into the middle of the church, led by torches and accompanied by singing.
      - The people in the church typically turn and face the gospel book, a sign that we orient our bodies and our lives around the Good News of Jesus Christ.
- The readings are not the only places in which we hear the words of scripture; the words of our liturgy come from the Bible as well.
  - Approximately 70 percent of The Book of Common Prayer is biblical quotation.
    - The prayer book includes the entire book of psalms.
    - Many of the most beloved and beautiful prayers and responses in the liturgy are also directly from the Bible.
      - Our opening greeting, "The Lord be with you," comes from Ruth 2:4
      - The Lord's Prayer is from Matthew 6:9-13
      - The Sanctus or "Holy, holy holy," comes from Isaiah 6:3 and Matthew 21:9
      - The words said at every Holy Eucharist are from 1 Corinthians 11:24-25.
    - Further, most of the phrases and images from our weekly collects and eucharistic prayers come directly from the Bible.
  - As Episcopalians, the Bible saturates our liturgy: From the scriptures we read to the prayers that we say, the Bible is deeply ingrained in everything that we do.
- The question is not whether Episcopalians read and honor the Bible—we do! The question is instead how Episcopalians read and honor the Bible.
- We get a glimpse of how Episcopalians read and honor the Bible in a somewhat surprising place—in our services of ordination.

- Our *Book of Common Prayer* includes three services of ordination: for bishop, priest, and deacon.
  - In each service, the person being ordained makes vows and promises distinct to that particular ministry.
  - But at the beginning of each service of ordination, all three orders make the same declaration, including this line: “I solemnly declare that I do believe the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be the Word of God, and to contain all things necessary to salvation...” (526).
  - This declaration is so important that The Book of Common Prayer instructs that it must be provided as a printed document, and every ordinand must sign the declaration during the ceremony, in the sight of all present (527).
- The vow begins with the phrase, “the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments.”
  - This is an important distinction: Many Christians focus heavily on the New Testament, often to the exclusion of the Old Testament.
  - As Episcopalians, we clearly state that both the Old and New Testaments are Holy Scripture. We don’t throw out or dismiss the stories of the Old Testament.
  - God’s revelation to humanity begins with Genesis 1:1, and the story of God’s great love for us is constant and consistent throughout the Old and New Testaments.
  - The Old Testament is the Bible that Jesus read, knew, and
- The vow also says that the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are “the Word of God.”
  - We proclaim this same phrase in worship in response to the scripture readings.
  - Quite simply, this means that we believe the Bible is more than just nice stories; it is the Word of God.
  - In the catechism, we explain this phrase further: “Q. Why do we call the Holy Scriptures the Word of God? A. We call them the Word of God because God inspired their human authors and because God still speaks to us through the Bible” (853).
  - The Bible is the Word of God because at the time of its writing, it was inspired by God and because, when we hear these words today we, too, can be inspired by God.
  - The answer in the catechism also acknowledges the human component: Human authors wrote the Bible, and human listeners hear these words today. But the words are not just human-composed; they are not simply stories written by humans about God, with no involvement from God. They are, in some mysterious way that we can neither quantify nor understand, inspired by God.
  - So the scriptures are both/and: They are human and holy, they are written and heard by people. And both those who wrote and those who hear were and are inspired by God.
- Finally, the vow taken by ordinands proclaims that the Holy Scriptures “contain all things necessary to salvation.”
  - This is important: People don’t need any additional knowledge beyond the Bible to learn about God’s salvation.
  - As Episcopalians, you don’t have to have read or pray The Book of Common Prayer or believe some set of ideas promoted by another book or source. The basics of the Christian faith are conveyed in the Bible, and Episcopalians aren’t required to believe or subscribe to anything that is not in the Bible.
  - Can you learn about and meet and experience God in other ways and places? Of course you can! But the additional stuff isn’t necessary.

# ***TAKING THE BIBLE SERIOUSLY***

- From the liturgy, ordination vows, and catechism, we see that Episcopalians take the Bible seriously. But that doesn't mean that we read the Bible literally.
  - The truth is, no one reads the Bible literally, even people who claim that they do.
    - In John 8:12, Jesus says: "I am the light of the world." If we took that literally, it would mean we believe that Jesus glowed, that he emanated light.
    - If Jesus literally glowed, the disciples never needed light and candles; they could just stand Jesus in the middle of the room and use him to read by!
    - Obviously, Jesus didn't mean that literally. He meant us to hear these words as a gripping image, so that we might understand Jesus and his presence in the world in a new way through the metaphor of darkness and light.
  - Every reading of the Bible requires us to interpret what we are reading, to decide how we understand the images that the Bible uses, to sift through what is metaphor and what is factual description, what is imagery and what is command.
- But even though we don't take every word of the Bible literally (again, no one does!) we do, absolutely take the Bible seriously.
  - We believe that the Bible is both real and true.
  - We believe the Bible contains real stories about real people who had real experiences of God in the real world.
  - We believe that the Bible is completely, deeply true. The Bible tells us truth about ourselves, about the world, and about God. Often that truth is told through metaphor and poetry that is not literal, and we might have to wrestle with its meaning in order to fully understand what God is saying to us.

- Understanding the Bible truthfully rather than literally is hard.
  - We do this work, in part, by learning more about the Bible so that we can better understand and interpret it.
  - For instance, it might help in our understanding if we recognized the Bible not as a single book but as a library or collection of sixty-six books bound in one volume.
    - The Old Testament, sometimes called the Hebrew Bible, is made up of three main sections: the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings.
      - ***The Torah*** (also called the Pentateuch) includes the first five books of the Bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Deuteronomy, and Numbers.
      - ***The Prophets*** include both the major prophets, like Isaiah and Jeremiah, and the twelve minor prophets, the shorter prophetic books such as Micah and Habbakuk.
      - ***The Writings*** include historical writings, such as Chronicles, poetic writings like the Psalms, and wisdom writings like Proverbs and Song of Solomon.
    - The New Testament is composed of four sections.
      - ***The Gospels*** include Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.
      - ***The Book of Acts*** tells the story of the early churches and the work of the Holy Spirit.
      - ***The Epistles*** feature the letters of Paul and other early Christian missionaries.
      - ***The Revelation to John***, the final book of the Bible, is the account of John's mystical vision of God's final judgment.
    - Additionally, Anglicans (and Episcopalians!) also include the Apocrypha, a collection of books written between the Old and New Testaments (called intertestamental books).
      - These books have been included in some editions of the Bible since the fifth century and were written at the same time as many of the other books in the Bible.
      - The Roman Catholic and Anglican churches both include the Apocrypha in the Bible, although they are not given the same status as the Old and New Testaments, which are agreed upon across denominations.
      - Still, passages from the Apocrypha are occasionally read in worship as part of our lectionary, and our church agrees that the Apocrypha is helpful for instruction and learning.
  - The books of the Old Testament, the New Testament, and the Apocrypha were written by different people in different places in different times in different languages.
    - Some of the books were written in Hebrew, some in Greek, some in Aramaic.
    - Not only are the languages different but so too are the genres. The Bible is not all one kind of writing.
      - Some books are history, some are poetry, some are law, some are prophecy, some are narratives, some are letters or epistles.
      - Different kinds of writing occur even within the same book!
      - From one verse to the next, the Bible can change between poetry and prose, between comparison and command.

- All of these variations, including style, tone, and authorship, require careful reading to begin to understand and interpret the Bible.
- So how do Episcopalians read the Bible? One of the collects in *The Book of Common Prayer* gives us a template for how to understand and interpret the Bible. It says:
  - “Blessed Lord, who caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant us so to hear them, read, mark, learn and inwardly digest them, that we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which you have given us in our Savior Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.” (236)
- This prayer offers a pattern for how we can and should read the Bible as Episcopalians:
  - It begins with a reminder that the holy scriptures originate and are grounded in God. God caused the Bible to be written.
  - And God did so “for our learning.” The Bible was written by God but for us.
  - The Bible is fundamentally about relationship; it is a conversation, a communication, between God and humanity.
  - Further, the Bible exists so that we might learn more about God and more about ourselves, about our history and who we are today, about those who have followed God and those who have failed, and about what we are called, as followers of Jesus, to take up and what we are called to lay down.

# *LEARNING ABOUT GOD*

- The collect names six specific actions that we can engage the Bible in order to meet God.
  - *Hear*
    - We usually think of the Bible as a book that we read, but this collect reminds us that the first way that we encounter the Bible is by hearing it.
    - Before these words were written down, much of the Bible was an oral tradition, stories told through generations so that people would remember the mighty deeds of God. There is a reason that we say the Bible “speaks.”
    - When we gather together as a community, we hear the Bible read aloud in our service of Holy Eucharist.
    - It is important, as much as we are able, to try to hear the words, rather than reading them from our bulletins or Bibles.
    - Reading is an individual activity, each person individually focused on her own paper. Listening is a communal activity, the entire community focused on one voice, proclaiming aloud the Word of the Lord.
    - The different voices of the lectors, who read aloud the lessons in worship, remind us of the different voices of the authors of the Bible. Listening to the Bible read aloud can help us hear things that we might otherwise miss or be struck by a familiar reading in a new way.
    - Even struggling to hear, or hearing imperfectly, can help teach us about the beauty and difficulty of the Bible.
      - Which words did you hear, even if you didn’t hear all of them?
      - Where did your mind go, if you struggled to keep focus?
      - How can you discipline yourself so that you can both listen and hear better?
      - How does hearing the Bible in community change the way that you understand it?



○ *Read*

- Of course, hearing scripture read aloud in worship is not the only way we encounter the Bible.
- We are also able to read the Bible, for ourselves, as individuals.
- In our modern world, it is easy to forget how extraordinary and radical this is.
  - For centuries, very few people were able to read the Bible, since most of the population was illiterate.
  - And even fewer people were able to afford copies of the Bible, since the Bible was written out by hand on precious materials that were incredibly expensive.
  - For a long time, reading and interpreting the Bible was a privilege reserved for the wealthy and educated elite.
  - Reformers and missionaries have fought and died so that we can have access to read the Bible, in our own homes, in our own languages.
  - Thanks to their work, in our time, everyday people can hold in their hands and read for themselves the Holy Word of God.
- We are expected not only to hear short sections of the Bible read aloud once a week in worship but also to read the Bible ourselves, every day. It is not an either/or proposition but a both/and. We both hear the Bible read aloud in worship, and we read the Bible for ourselves.
- We can and should read other parts of the Bible: the context around the passages we heard, in order to fit them into a larger narrative, or other parts of the Bible that we do not hear read aloud in church. It is not enough simply to hear the scriptures read aloud in church on Sunday. We are called to a next step, a deeper engagement—to read the Bible for ourselves, as well.

## ○ *Mark*

- Next, we are reminded that we don't just read or listen to the scriptures casually or carelessly. We are instead reminded to mark them. Mark, in this sense, means to notice or pay careful attention to something.
  - We shouldn't just skim over the Bible in order to check off "read the Bible" from our to-do list.
  - Instead we are called to pay careful attention to what we are reading, to notice things that are interesting or confusing, uplifting or upsetting.
- Reading the Bible with this kind of care and attention is more demanding than simply scanning through the words, but it is also more rewarding.
- With this deliberate practice of marking scripture, we begin to notice new things in the Bible—and hear the words speaking to us more powerfully.

## ○ *Learn*

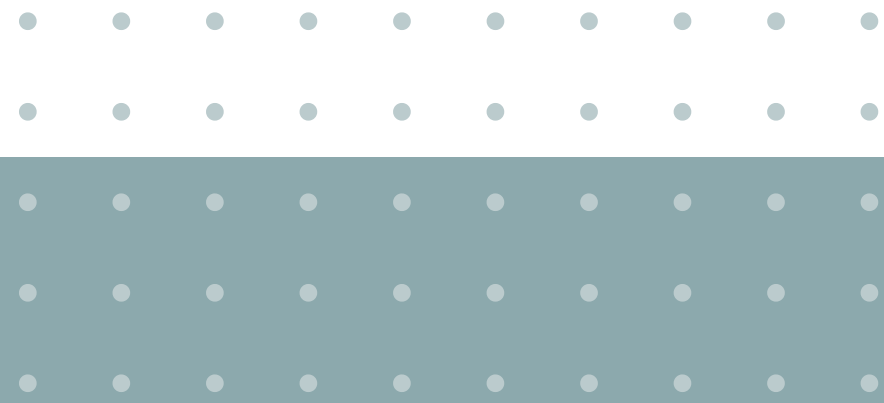
- Next, our collect tells us that we are called to learn the scriptures.
- It would be all too easy to hear or read the Bible, say to ourselves, "Huh, that's interesting," and then to stop there. But we are called to more than that. We are called to learn, to change, to grow in response to what we hear and read in the Bible.
- Learning, in its most simple definition, means to "to gain knowledge or skill by studying, practicing, being taught, or experiencing something."
- When we increase our frequency of reading and engaging the Bible, we gain more knowledge about the Bible and become more skilled interpreters of the sacred text.
- We learn by reading the Bible again and again...and again and again, always discovering something new.
- We read the words of the Bible, and then we study them, looking more deeply into the Bible for patterns and connections. We can also put the words of the Bible into practice, learning through experience.
- Too often, Christians, perhaps especially Episcopalians, have been taught that "Sunday school" is only for children, and confirmation signals graduation from learning in church.
  - Nothing could be further from the truth. Learning is a lifelong endeavor.
  - We are called, as Christians, to constantly learn more about our faith, discovering new ways of understanding the scriptures and connecting to God.
  - The Bible is rich enough that we can learn new things every time we read it, and we can hear God speaking to us in new and different ways.

○ *Inwardly digest*

- Encountering the Bible is not just a head exercise, a cerebral process of thinking and evaluating.
- The fifth command of our collect, to inwardly digest the scriptures, reminds us that encountering the Bible is a whole-body activity.
- In our worship on Sundays, we take in the literal food of communion: The bread and wine becomes the Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ and feeds us.
- We are also fed on the Word of God.
- Throughout the Bible, we are told that the words of scripture have a nourishing quality, that they taste like honey (Psalm 119:103).
- Pastor Eugene Peterson, in his wonderful work *Eat this Book*, explores the words of God to the prophet Ezekiel, when God commands Ezekiel to “eat this scroll” (Ezekiel 3:3).
  - Peterson uses this as a metaphor for the way that Christians are called to interact with the scriptures, the Bible, by taking the words into ourselves, gnawing on them like a dog at a bone, chewing them over and over to see what new nourishment they might offer, what last remnants might cling to the bone.
  - That idea is precisely what our collect proclaims, that we are called, not only to hear, read, mark, and learn the Bible but also to go so far as to inwardly digest it.
  - When we eat something, we take it into ourselves, and it becomes our sustenance and substance.
  - The Bible is meant to act that way in us. We are asked to take the Bible into ourselves, to let it sustain us, and to let it transform us, so that we can become what it proclaims.

○ *Embrace and ever hold fast*

- Our collect concludes with a final active phrase, “embrace and ever hold fast.”
- This final phrase is not a command but a hope.
- The Bible is the story of God’s great love for us, a story that is full of hope, a story that offers the gift and promise of everlasting life. God’s hope is that we will embrace what has been offered.
- If we take the time to do our part, to follow these actions detailed by the collect, we will hear the story of God, who loves us, who embraces us as God’s beloved children, and who holds fast to us, even when we wander and stray.
- In response, God calls us to reciprocate what God has already done for us: to embrace and ever hold fast the gift of God in Christ, the blessed hope of everlasting life.



# SALVATION AND GRACE



# ***BEING SAVED***

- Christians often talk about being “saved.”
  - Sometimes they tell stories of how they had been saved from helplessness or hopelessness.
  - Others talk of being saved from addiction or abuse.
  - Some have tangible experiences of the risen Jesus or physically felt the Holy Spirit.
  - Others talk of travels as missionaries to serve the least and the lost in far-flung countries of the world.
- But sometimes our stories of being saved aren’t quite so flashy.
- And yet, they are still stories of salvation.
  - For those working hard to earn God’s love, Jesus saved us from believing that we have to be perfect in order to earn God’s salvation. to be or ever could be “good enough” to warrant salvation.
  - The gospel of salvation is that there is nothing that we can do (or fail to do) that will cause God to love us any more or any less.
  - Trying to earn God’s love is exhausting. It leads to lives full of endless striving, of always feeling “not enough.”
  - Being saved from this futile idea is no less (and no more) miraculous than the other, more “exciting” stories of salvation.
  - The idea that Jesus saves us from trying to save ourselves is a central tenet of our faith. Another word for that is grace.

# GRACE

- In *The Book of Common Prayer*, the catechism defines grace as “God’s favor toward us, unearned and undeserved; by grace God forgives our sins, enlightens our minds, stirs our hearts, and strengthens our wills” (858).
  - This definition points us toward a couple of key ideas about grace.
  - The first is that grace is unearned and undeserved.
    - This is a crucial point yet difficult to fully comprehend. We live in a culture that values pulling ourselves up by our bootstraps, and we’re often told that “God helps those who help themselves!”
    - Yet neither of those ideas are found anywhere in the Bible and are, in fact, contrary to scripture and Christian teaching.
    - People don’t receive grace because they behave well or work hard or do the right things.
    - God’s grace isn’t about us or about our actions at all—God’s grace is about God’s goodness, God’s love, God’s favor.
    - Grace is about God, not about us.
    - There is nothing good that we can do to earn God’s love, and nothing bad that we can do to stop receiving God’s love.
    - Grace is the promise that God’s love is a free gift to us, regardless of how badly we screw up or how often we fail to do the good that we intend.
    - This is incredibly good news, for all of us, since none of us is perfect, yet all of us receive God’s grace as a gift (Romans 3:23-24).
  - But here’s the catch.
    - The amazing, incredible gift of God’s grace is for everyone...not just for you.
    - You receive God’s love, even when you don’t deserve it.
    - And so does your enemy, or the person you think is lazy, or the one whose opinion you disagree with.
    - Grace is a free gift to everyone, not just those we like or agree with.
    - Sometimes the hardest thing about grace is believing that God offers it to us, and other times the hardest thing about grace is realizing that God offers it to everyone else too!

# *SAVED FROM SIN*

- The unearned, undeserved gift of God's grace is a good thing.
- Because, if we're honest with ourselves, we know that we don't deserve the gift of God's love, and that, no matter how hard we might try, we could never do enough to earn it.
  - The truth is, the world we live in is broken.
  - And the people around us are broken.
  - And we, ourselves, are broken.
- We are broken because we don't do the things that we know we should do, and we do the things that we know we shouldn't do.
  - We act with selfishness, meanness, and judgment.
  - We act out of prejudice or fear or anger.
  - Or sometimes it's not our action, but our inaction that is so troubling: we get too busy or too distracted or too tired, and we don't do the good, important, holy things that we know we should do.
  - And sometimes, it's not our action or our inaction, it's our attitude that's the problem. We do the right things for the wrong reasons. Or we might act rightly, while still engaging in uncharitable thoughts.
- Another word for all of this brokenness, in ourselves and in the world, is sin.
  - Sin is sometimes a result of our direct actions, and it's sometimes a result of our failure to act.
  - Sin is revealed in the systems of injustice which we participate in just by being alive.
    - The fact that we have food we throw away while children around the world starve.
    - The heat and light and travel we enjoy that lead to the degradation of our planet, God's creation.
    - The reality that, because of prejudices and assumptions ingrained deeply in our society, some people have power and privilege simply because of who they are or what they look like.
  - Sin is anything that separates us from God or from one another.

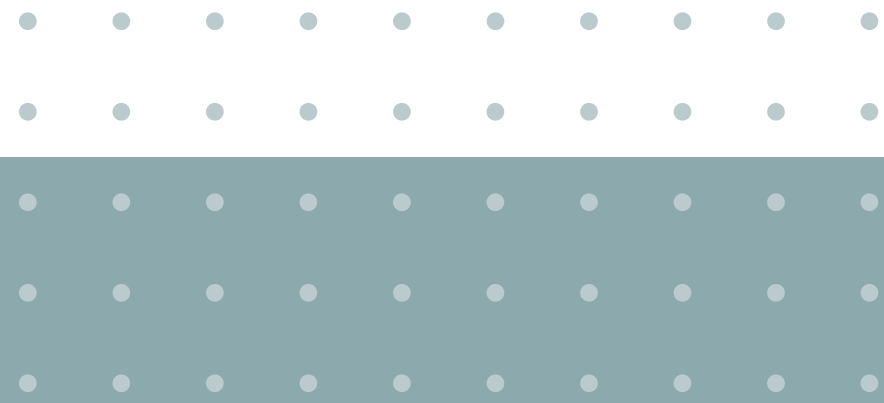
# ***MISUNDERSTANDING GRACE***

- Since grace is a gift from God, we might be inclined to see it as license—tacit permission—to do whatever we want.
- If God loves us no matter what, then as long as we have prayed and asked Jesus' forgiveness we should be able to do whatever we want and still “get into heaven,” right? Well, not exactly.
- James writes in his letter, “What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,” and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead” (James 2:14-17).
- This is why the second part of the catechism says, “by grace God forgives our sins, enlightens our minds, stirs our hearts, and strengthens our wills.”
  - The gift of God's grace is active and powerful; grace works in our minds, our hearts, and our wills to enlighten, stir, and strengthen us.
  - There is an expectation that the power of God's grace working in us will change us, enliven and inspire us, so that we can work on behalf of God's kingdom in the world.
- Now, this isn't a tit-for-tat, where God has given us the gift of grace and we have to spend the rest of our lives repaying that gift through our service or love or work.
  - That wouldn't be a gift—that would be a loan.
  - Grace is a gift, a free gift.
  - We can't do anything to earn it, and we can't do anything to make God take it away.
  - But we *can* (and should) live our lives in response to that love.
  - The gift of God's grace is so astonishing that it urges us onward to do good things—not because we have to but because we want to; not out of duty but out of love.
  - In fact, living lives of love and service in response to God's grace is how we were created to live.
- As Paul writes, “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life” (Ephesians 2:8-10).
  - Paul word's are astonishing: The gift of God's grace allows us to become who we were created to be and to do what we were created to do.
- In Genesis, God looked at humanity and said that humans were “very good” (1:31).
  - We were created as good and created for good—living lives of generosity, love, kindness, and joy in relationship to God, humanity, and creation is simply a return to who we were created to be.



# ***SAVED FOR SOMETHING***

- Too often we have a limited understanding of salvation.
  - We think of salvation as being saved from something:
    - People are saved from addiction or abuse, or from self-reliance and self-sufficiency.
    - And that is certainly true; Jesus saves us from sin and death and from all the other conditions and mindsets that enslave us.
- But James and Paul and many other witnesses from the Bible and Christian tradition remind us is that we are also saved for something.
  - We are saved for abundant life, saved for service to God and God's people, saved for the building up of the kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven.
- The Greek word for salvation, *sozo*, contains a wealth of meaning, far beyond simply being saved from hurt or danger.
  - *Sozo* means health and wholeness, wellness in the deepest sense of that word.
  - Salvation in the Bible is about fullness of life.
- When we limit salvation and grace to life in heaven, a life free from sin and death, we only get part of the picture.
  - The salvation of Jesus of Christ is about eternal life in heaven, but it's also about eternal life that begins now.
  - In the service of Holy Eucharist in The Book of Common Prayer, the ministers distribute the bread and the wine while saying this sentence: "The Body (Blood) of our Lord Jesus Christ keep you in everlasting life."
    - Have you ever noticed that verb before—"keep?" It might seem like a small thing, but it's a big theological statement.
    - "Keep" reminds us that we have already begun experiencing everlasting life—right here, and right now.
    - When we are nourished with the Body and Blood of Christ in eucharist, it is keeping us, sustaining us, in our eternal life, which is already underway.
- From the moment that we receive God's grace, we are being saved for something, filled with God's grace that enlightens our minds, stirs our hearts, and strengthens our wills.
  - Our salvation is lived out in this world, as well as in the world to come.
  - The grace of God finds expression in the works that we do in God's name, not because we have to, but because we want to, and because God, working in us, can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine.



# PRAYER



# WHAT IS PRAYER?

- Perhaps most striking is that the catechism begins by describing adoration and praise, two kinds of prayer that might be unfamiliar.
  - *Adoration* is “the lifting up of the heart and mind to God, asking nothing but to enjoy God’s presence” (857).
    - This might be a surprising way to think about prayer, because adoration is less about a specific kind of action or a certain set of words and instead about an attitude, an orientation of our hearts and minds that is founded in the enjoyment of God’s very presence.
    - This attitude of orientation is related to—but slightly different from—the next kind of prayer, praise.
  - *Praise*, the act of glorifying God because of God’s goodness, is a fundamental part of who we are as humans.
    - It is important to note that praise is not offering thanks to God for the things that God has done for us (that’s thanksgiving, which we hear about next!)
    - Praise is simply expressing admiration and awe for who God is.
    - “We praise God, not to obtain anything, but because God’s Being draws praise from us” (857).
  - *Thanksgiving*, the third kind of prayer, is closely related to the first two.
    - Thanksgiving is giving thanks to God “for all the blessings of this life, for our redemption, and for whatever draws us closer to God” (857).
    - Often, prayers of thanksgiving are more specific than those of adoration or praise.
    - We move from adoring and praising God for God’s very being to giving thanks to God for particular things, actions, or experiences in our lives and the lives of those around us.

- These first three kinds of prayer described in the catechism describes are prayers of joy.
  - This is essential to our practice of prayer, rooting our relationship with God in an attitude of awe, enjoyment, and celebration.
  - Of course, awe and joy are not all of the story.
  - Because we live in a world that is broken by sin, and we ourselves are far from perfect, our prayers aren't exclusively words of celebration and joy.
- An essential part of prayer is being honest with God about our failures in prayers of penitence.
  - “In penitence, we confess our sins and make restitution where possible, with the intention to amend our lives” (857).
  - Prayers of penitence allow us to take an honest look at ourselves, at our lives and our shortcomings, so that we can acknowledge what we have done wrong and strive to do better in the future.
  - In prayers of penitence, we submit ourselves to God, in the promise that God will forgive and renew us, so that we are not defined by the worst parts of ourselves.
- It is then, after honestly acknowledging our shortcomings that we are ready to give ourselves over, fully, to God in prayers of oblation.
  - “Oblation is an offering of ourselves, our lives and labors, in union with Christ, for the purposes of God” (857).
  - Out of thanksgiving for all that God has done in and for us, we offer ourselves in service to God and God's purposes in the world.

- The last two kinds of prayer described in the catechism, intercession and petition, are probably the most familiar.
  - In prayers of *intercession*, we bring “before God the needs of others” (857).
    - Specifically, the forms for the prayers of the people in The Book of Common Prayer instruct us to make intercession for: “The Universal Church, its members, and its mission; the Nation and all in authority; the welfare of the world; the concerns of the local community; those who suffer and those in any trouble; the departed” (383).
    - This list reminds us of the breadth that our prayers for others can and should take. Intercession is not merely praying for our family and close friends who have asked for our prayers (though that is important).
    - Our intercessions should extend to the welfare of the community and, indeed, the whole world.
    - We are commanded to pray, particularly for those who suffer and are in trouble, even when those in trouble are not our immediate friends and family.
    - In our prayers of intercession, we focus beyond ourselves to the whole human family, a reminder in prayer of Jesus’ command to love our neighbors as ourselves.
  - Finally, our Catechism turns to prayers of petition.
    - “In petition we present our own needs, that God’s will may be done” (857).
    - Bringing our needs before God is an important part of prayer.
    - God deeply desires relationship with us, and being honest with God about our desires is a fundamental part of our relationship with God.
    - We should not shy away from naming our needs before God in prayers of petition.
    - And yet, as this definition reminds us, petition is presenting our needs that God’s will may be done.

- Too often we approach prayer as though God is some sort of a vending machine, and if we simply “put in our money” (i.e. our prayers), we’ll get our candy bar (i.e. whatever we’re asking for).
- The catechism reminds us that prayer is broader and deeper.
  - We certainly pray to name our needs before God.
  - But we also pray in order to rejoice in God’s presence, to praise God’s very being, to thank God for the blessings of our life, to ask forgiveness for the things we have done wrong, to offer ourselves more fully to God’s service, and to make requests, not only for ourselves, but also on behalf of the whole world.
  - And in our requests, we do not pray in order to get what we think we want (for ourselves or others); we pray, just as Jesus himself did in the face of death, that God’s will may be done.

- One of my favorite ways of describing prayer is by saying that “prayer is a conversation that takes place in relationship.” In fact, my relationship with God in prayer is a lot like my relationship with my spouse.
  - Sometimes, my spouse and I spend time simply enjoying one another’s presence.
    - We don’t have to say anything or do anything; we can simply sit in comfortable silence and be together.
    - That’s a bit like adoration.
  - And sometimes I tell my spouse, through my words or in my actions, that I am deeply grateful, not for something specific he has done, but simply for who he is: for his generosity and thoughtfulness; I am overwhelmed with gratitude that he is in my life.
    - That’s a little like praise.
  - It’s also important, for the health of our relationship, that I tell my spouse “thank you” on a regular basis.
    - Sometimes I express gratitude for the big things that he does and some times for the little things that are easy to overlook.
    - That’s like thanksgiving.
  - Often, I need to apologize to my spouse because I’ve done something wrong, or forgotten to do something I was supposed to do.
    - I try (though I often fail) to make those apologies real and not simply lip service; when I’ve really messed up, I work hard to make it right again.
    - That’s similar to penitence.
  - When my spouse expresses frustration or is overwhelmed or needs something, I say, “How can I help?”
    - Sometimes I step in and help without even being asked. I offer myself, for support and assistance, however I can.
    - That’s kind of like oblation.
  - And of course, my relationship with my spouse involves asking for things—for myself or for others.
    - When I need help, I turn to my spouse for support and assistance.
    - Sometimes that assistance is an action that helps “fix” a problem or achieve a goal.
    - But often the support I seek is advice, reassurance, comfort, and strength in the midst of a struggle.
    - Seeking help from my spouse, whatever form it might take, is akin to intercession and petition.

- This is, on some level, what prayer is like.
  - It's a conversation that takes place in relationship.
  - It involves both talking and listening.
  - It involves times of comfortable silence and enjoyment of one another's presence.
  - It involves both words and actions.
  - It involves both offering and receiving help.
  - It involves both giving and taking (and sometimes just being together).
- The truth is that my relationship with my spouse (or with any person) needs all these different kinds of interaction in order to be healthy.
  - Our relationship would be badly damaged if I approached every interaction with an agenda.
  - It wouldn't be a healthy relationship if I only talked to my spouse when I wanted or needed something from him, if I was angry if he didn't do exactly what I wanted all the time, if I never said thank you or apologized, or if I engaged in daily interactions with a tit-for-tat mentality.
- The same is true with our relationship with God.
  - Prayer isn't about one kind of interaction with God; it is about relating with God in the richness of adoration, praise, thanksgiving, petition, oblation, intercession and petition.
  - Prayer is a conversation that takes place in relationship.



# *WHY DO WE PRAY?*

- One of the questions almost every Christian struggles with is, “Does prayer really work?”
  - Often, this question comes in response to a situation of deep pain: a person has prayed, fervently, for something that didn’t happen — perhaps a job promotion that never came or a hope that was never realized, or even physical healing for a loved one who died.
  - These questions are painful and difficult; they are questions that believers throughout the ages have asked again and again: When we reach out to God in prayer, does it actually do anything? Does prayer matter?
- How we answer that question depends on what we think prayer is and what we think prayer is for.
  - If we believe that prayer is like a vending machine, where we put in our money and receive a product in exchange, then we become disillusioned when we don’t get what we “paid for.”
  - If we think that prayer is an assignment at work — something we do in order to earn money or status or acclaim — then we are frustrated when we aren’t rewarded for our hard work and good behavior.
  - If we think of prayer as a voicemail that we leave for God and then wait for God to get back to us with an “answer” to our question, then we become angry when we never get a return phone call.
- But thinking about prayer as a conversation that takes place in relationship fundamentally changes the way that we approach prayer, and it changes what “success” looks like.
  - What if the goal of prayer is not simply to put in our money and get what we want but instead to engage in real, deep conversation with God?
  - Then prayer works, not when you get what you want, but any time that you engage in conversation and you find relationship.

- Prayer works because it is important, in any relationship, to be honest, to say what we really want and really hope for and really need, and the act of approaching God in prayer, of naming what we yearn for, in itself builds relationship.
- It works because, in the act of praying, we are changed—we realize that we are not alone, no matter how alone we feel.
- We find strength or comfort or at least release of the feelings that have built up inside of us.
- Sometimes, when I'm talking to my spouse, I just need to be "heard." I'll say, "I don't need you to fix this, just need you to listen."
  - At the end of our conversation, there might not be any change in the situation, in the outward reality of the world; nothing will be "fixed."
  - And yet, the conversation has "worked," because I have been heard.
  - Prayer is often very much like that.
- That is not to say that prayer only changes us and our attitudes (though if and when that happens, it is a miracle as well!).
  - The witness of scripture is clear that God sometimes miraculously intervenes to change circumstances.
    - God protects the people when leading them out of Egypt (Exodus 14) | God feeds the Israelites with manna from heaven (Exodus 16)
    - God heals the sick and lame (Matthew 9:18-34)
    - God sets prisoners free (Acts 16:25-34).
    - The followers of Jesus continue to heal people in Christ's name (Acts 5:12-16)
  - The prayers in our Book of Common Prayer reflect the reality that we believe God does intervene with mighty action in the world, and we can and should ask for God's presence and power among us.
- But just as prayer takes a lot of forms, the outcome of prayer can take many shapes.
  - Sometimes the thing that is changed is the result or the circumstance; the person we prayed for is healed, or the deepest desire of our heart is fulfilled.
  - Sometimes the thing that is changed is our attitude or approach; we are strengthened or comforted or better able to face the days ahead, or we are given insight so that we know what we are called to be or do, regardless of the circumstance.
  - Sometimes the thing that is changed is someone else's heart or mind or actions, and that change impacts us.
  - Sometimes the thing that is changed is our relationship with God; we find new ways of relating to God or a new dimension to our conversation and companionship.
- Prayer is powerful, but it is also mysterious.
  - We should approach with fear and trembling any moral certainties about prayer.
  - We can do a great deal of damage to ourselves and one another if we pretend to know precisely how prayer works—any beliefs or assertions that "it must have been God's will" or "if only I'd prayed more or harder" move prayer out of the context of a conversation in relationship and into the context of an obligation or exchange—a deeply flawed context that damages our ability to relate to God.
  - There are many ways to pray, there are many outcomes to prayer, and everyone's relationship with God in prayer is different.

# HOW DO WE PRAY?

- Although we can never know exactly how prayer works, we can (and should) learn how to pray.
  - Prayer, like any spiritual discipline, is a matter of practice. It won't always feel natural the first few times we do it.
  - We might have to experiment with new ways of prayer in order to find the ones that help deepen our relationship with God.
- A few sessions ago we explored the Daily Office, one of the most essentially Anglican ways to pray.
  - In that session we also talked about the dozens of different resources within *The Book of Common Prayer* for prayer.
  - But of course, there are hundreds of other ways to pray, beyond those found in our prayer book.
    - You can pray by walking a labyrinth, by using rosary beads, or by creating icons or art.
    - You can use different forms for prayer, from the Ignatian concept of Examen to Contemplative Prayer to Lectio Divina.
    - You can pray kneeling or sitting or standing or moving.
    - You can pray in sound or in silence.
    - There is no one-size-fits-all form of prayer. Instead, there are a vast variety of different ways to pray, different methods for engaging in conversation with God.
- But whatever method you use for prayer, the important thing is to engage in the relationship, making time and space to meet God in prayer.

- And there are some specific things that we can do in order to improve our relationships with God in prayer.
  - **Start small.**
    - If you have never prayed before, it can seem overwhelming at first.
    - If you start out by saying that you are going to do the full Daily Office morning, noon, and night, then you might have set your sights too high (although if you do it—way to go!)
    - The important thing about starting a life of prayer is to start somewhere.
      - It could be grace at meals—every time—or daily morning prayer, or a weekly lectio divina session, or any number of things.
      - Choose a prayer discipline that you want to try, and go for it.
      - Commit to doing it daily for a period of time.
      - Then, when you've gotten comfortable, spend more time in prayer, or add another component.
  - **Show up.**
    - If prayer is a conversation that takes place in relationship, then you have to show up so that the conversation can happen!
    - The truth is, God is there—always waiting and hoping that we will show up.
    - Perhaps the most important thing that we can do is schedule a time for prayer, and then show up—even when other things crowd the calendar, even if it is hard or uncomfortable.
      - Make a space in your calendar (every day!) for God.
      - And then follow through on that commitment.
  - **Keep trying.**
    - Relationships are hard work—ask anyone who has been married for a long time!
    - Your relationship with God is no different.
    - There will be some bumps in the road.
      - You might try a prayer practice that you really hate, or the way that you have been praying for a long time may no longer work for you.
      - Be ready to change your prayer practice and try new things.
      - Ask for help from a priest or trusted friend if you need it.

- One of the collects from The Book of Common Prayer says this:
  - “Almighty and everlasting God, you are always more ready to hear than we to pray, and to give more than we either desire or deserve: Pour upon us the abundance of your mercy, forgiving us those things of which our conscience is afraid, and giving us those good things for which we are not worthy to ask, except through the merits and mediation of Jesus Christ our Savior; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God for ever and ever. Amen” (234).
  - God is always ready to hear us when we pray, longing to give us more than we desire or deserve.
  - It is our turn to engage that conversation, to respond in adoration, praise, thanksgiving, penitence, oblation, intercession, and penitence to the God who is waiting and yearning to enter more deeply into relationship with each one of us.